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ABSTRACT

Recent research into the relationship between cultural background and cognitive style has suggested that Mexican-American children typically display a "field-dependent" style as opposed to the "field-independent" style usually exhibited by Anglo children. Teachers of Mexican-American children should consider this difference in developing their instructional strategies. For example, physical distances between students and between the teacher and students should be reduced for field-dependent children. These personalities also react well to peer and cross-age teaching methods. The language experience approach, which allows cooperative learning activities, is useful in beginning reading instruction for such students. Field-dependent children also thrive in classes where discussions rather than lectures are used. Finally, social rewards such as smiles and praise rather than abstract rewards such as grades are very effective. However, since successful individuals must possess both cognitive styles, teachers should not restrict instruction to one. If the opposing cognitive style is introduced in a gradual manner, students will be able to function competently in both worlds. (FL)

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MATCHING READING INSTRUCTION TO COGNITIVE STYLE FOR MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN

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Charles Schulz has drawn a Peanuts cartoon strip where Charlie Brown and Linus are discussing Charlie's teacher. Charlie says "My teacher has an interesting theory ... She says teaching is like bowling. All you do is roll the ball down the middle and hope you touch most of the students." Linus replies "She must be a terrible bowler." (7) The point is clearly made. Students are not identical ten pins. Each one brings to the classroom his or her own unique combination of strengths, weaknesses, needs, and desires all framed by individual intellectual capacity and ways of responding to the world.

COGNITIVE STYLE CHARACTERISTICS

Awareness of this uniqueness has caused educators to continually search for greater understanding of the factors that effect human learning. Much of this activity has centered around definition and measurement of a

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concept called intelligence. More recently investigators have suggested aspects of intellectual functioning which go beyond or add to the behaviors traditionally labeled as intelligence. Intelligence has carried with it a "value assignment"--it is good to have more "intelligence," bad to have less.

Current thinking suggests that there are areas of mental activity that should not carry a value assignment, which are in fact "equal but different." One such area of intellectual functioning has been given the label "cognitive style," and within that framework a dimension called "field dependence-independence" has been studied. Research in the area of field dependence-independence was originally concerned with the perceptual ability of individuals to orient themselves in space.

As measurement of this difference in spacial orientation was pursued through a variety of manipulative and perceptual tasks, it began to appear "that the styles we first identified in perception manifest themselves as well when the person is dealing with symbolic representations, as in thinking and problem-solving." (9:8) Evidence also suggests differences in the area of social behavior, and that an individual's cognitive style is relatively stable over time. (9) Some of the differences between extremes of the Field Dependent-Independent dimension have been identified (Figure 1). In general, field dependent persons are more concerned about and sensitive to interpersonal relationships, and both accept and need external direction. However it is essential to remember that these descriptors represent extremes on a continuum and that most individuals fall some place between these polar positions. Neither extreme is "more desirable." Each has its own strengths and limitations, depending on the situation involved.

FIGURE 1

Field Dependent	Field Independent
Great attentiveness to social cues (e.g. facial expression, eye contact, body language)	Little awareness of social cues
"People oriented"--desire for physical closeness	Impersonal orientation--maintain physical distance
Influenced by ideas of others	Individualistic
Cooperative	Competitive
Sensitive to external positive or negative reinforcement	Sensitive to intrinsic motivational factors
Non-directive in relationships with others	Directive in interpersonal relationships
Accepting of environmental organization	Overcoming or restructuring of field organization
"Big picture"	Significant details

ACQUISITION OF COGNITIVE STYLE

Acquisition of cognitive style is still under investigation. However, Rameriz (6) has suggested that cognitive style results from the socialization process within the family, where during the early years certain behaviors are rewarded and others punished. He has gone on from that position to suggest that different cultural backgrounds lead to differences in cognitive style. For example, research by Rameriz (6) and others (3,4) tends to support the theory that Mexican-American children from traditional backgrounds usually exhibit cognitive styles that are labeled "Field dependent or Field sensitive" while Anglo children usually show a field independent cognitive style. Mexican-American children who have been raised in environments where they are in close contact with Anglos usually exhibit cognitive styles characteristic mid-way between these two groups.

If the cognitive style characteristics of Mexican-American children do differ from those of Anglo children, then the implications for education must be examined. Witkin (9) has pointed out that a great deal more research is needed before it will be known definitely whether it is better for instructional techniques and setting to match or conflict with the child's cognitive style. Other writers (4,5) have argued strongly for the value of matching instruction to cognitive style. A humanistic approach to education would suggest the value of such a match.

IMPLICATIONS FOR READING INSTRUCTION

Classroom Management

To achieve such a match, what general instructional strategies and specific reading approaches are appropriate for use with field-dependent Mexican-American children? First, the physical setting must be considered.

Traditional rows of individual desks maintain physical distance between children. Field dependent personalities desire physical closeness and are more comfortable at tables or with desks grouped to provide less distance between individuals. In the same way, the teacher's physical location should be close to the students, rather than isolated behind a desk in a corner or at the front of the room. Library or reading corners should have room for several children to snuggle together with their books rather than being isolating cubicles with room for only one child.

Field-dependent personality traits also lend themselves to successful use of both peer-teaching (2) and cross-age teaching approaches. In both peer teaching and cross-age teaching the primary necessity is that the "student-teacher" must have more knowledge of the subject or skill being taught than the students who are being helped. The students who are helped gain more practice at a task than they could otherwise have in a "single" teacher classroom. The "student-teacher" receives reinforcement of skills but also gains in feelings of self-worth, and the classroom teacher gains a more manageable teaching task.

Beginning Reading Instruction

Consideration of the field-dependent-independent variable also has implications for beginning reading instruction. It adds another dimension to the argument in favor of the Language Experience Approach (LEA) as the method of choice for Mexican-American children. Usually supported on the basis of linguistic concerns, LEA can also provide opportunities for interpersonal experiences. The child's control over his story content provides for emphasis on social concerns. The numerous word-bank activities which reinforce LEA provide for a variety of cooperative learning experiences with other students.

When the decision has been made to use published materials for beginning reading instruction, those text or trade books chosen should be examined for their concern with social issues and the way in which they lend themselves to cooperative rather than competitive instructional activities. Materials which do not have these characteristics may require special teacher supplementation to increase their effectiveness.

Developmental Reading

The "people orientation" and willingness to accept ideas of others causes a field-dependent student to thrive in classes where discussions rather than "teacher talks" are used, and where the topics discussed or read about concern social issues and values rather than highly factual or technical material. At the same time, the field dependent person has the seemingly contradictory (9) acceptance of and need for externally provided organization or structure. This suggests that the discussion or reading experience needs to be preceded by clearly defined goals, either provided by the teacher as in the case of advanced organizers or structural over-views, or developed by the students directed by the teacher as in the case of Directed Reading-Thinking Activities. (8)

Reward System

Cohen (1) and Ramirez (6) have suggested that our schools are typically oriented toward field independence. Although this may often be true in the instructional setting, it is even more obvious in the "reward system" within our schools. The "reward system" is usually one of tests and grades. Most tests involve some time limit, emphasize retention of factual information, and emphasize competition--all conditions which favor the

field independent child. Teachers need to be aware of these disadvantages faced by the field dependent child, and they need to make sure that such social rewards as smiles and words of praise are used as well as abstract rewards such as grades and gold stars.

Developing Flexibility of Cognitive Style

As suggested previously, a strong argument can be made, on humanistic grounds alone, for matching the educational setting to a child's cognitive style. However, in life some situations call for field dependent traits, and some favor the field independent individual. Successful individuals usually can adapt to either set of demands. Therefore, only matching a child's cognitive style is a disservice. Instead, once the child feels secure in his educational setting, experiences which require the opposite cognitive style should be gradually introduced. "When this familiarization is managed successfully, children acquire the ability to function comfortably and competently in their preferred cognitive style and in the 'non-preferred' or unfamiliar cognitive style." (5:3)

CONCLUSION

Discussion of cognitive style and its implications for reading instruction has focused on the Mexican-American child. However, all children must be treated as individuals. Some Mexican-American children are extremely field independent. Some Anglo children are very field dependent. Although cultural background may provide a clue to a child's cognitive style it does not provide a guarantee. Each child must be evaluated individually and decisions must be made accordingly.

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